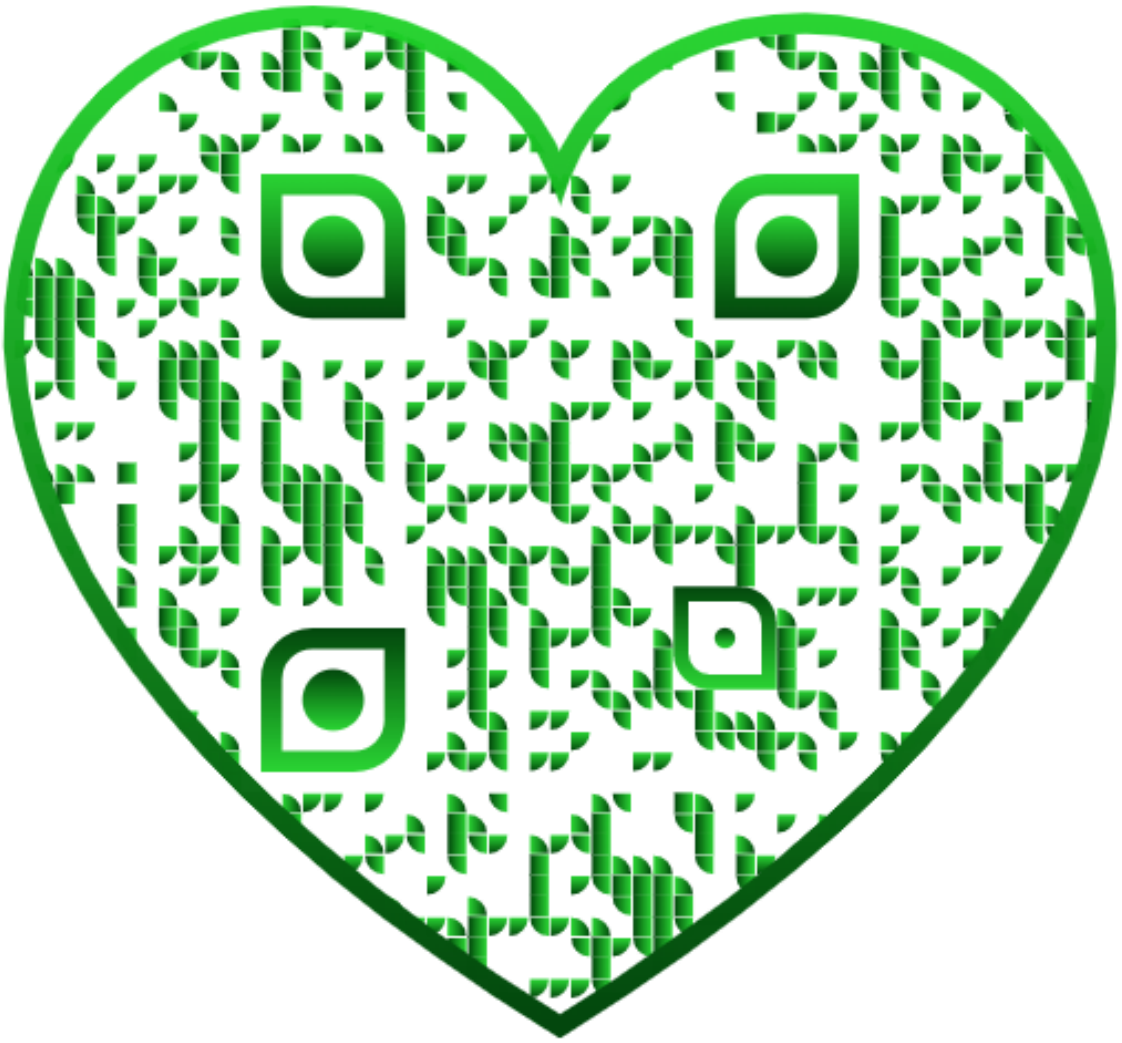
HOT WIRED

By Andy Ellis

Roy Buchanan's 12 Steps to Better Bending

Raw, edgy, singing, and soulful. Playing only a battered '53 Tele through a blackface Vibrolux, Roy Buchanan harmonized two streams of American music to create a distinctive voice. "I ended up mixing the white man's church music with the black man's blues to get that sweet feeling in my playing," he once told *GP*. Many of his contemporaries tried, but it was Buchanan who found perfect equilibrium between country and blues. Even today, few players have walked this tightrope so well. Years after Buchanan's death, he continues to inspire guitarists of all persuasions. (See "Titans of the Tele," page 92, for an overview of Buchanan's life and work.) ■ Two aspects of Buchanan's



playing are immediately striking: his urgent, squalling tone and expressive string bending. In this lesson, we'll examine Buchanan's string-stretching techniques, and dissect moves guaranteed to add fire to your music, whatever form it takes. To hear how Buchanan works these ideas into his solos, listen to songs where he stretches out, such as "Filthy Teddy," "After Hours," "Five String Blues," "I Won't Tell You No Lies," and "Fly … Night Bird," as well as live versions of "Soul Dressing" and "Hey Joe." *Sweet Dreams: The Anthology* [Polydor] serves as an excellent introduction to Buchanan's unique playing and belongs in every Tele freak's CD collection. Connoisseurs point to *Second Album* as the definitive Buchanan record.

TRITONE WRENCHING

Let's start heating up the *G* string with **Ex. 1**, a whining suspended-4th-to-dominant-7th stretch. Buchanan's first instrument was pedal steel, and you can hear it in this amazingly simple and effective move. You'll find opportunities to sneak it into almost any song. If you learn but one lick in the next nine months, make it this one.

The concept is easy: On the fifth, fourth, and third strings, grab a rootless dominant 7 (5, ♭7, 3, low to high) and pull the 3 toward your feet until it becomes the 4. Essentially, you're wrenching in and out of the tritone (♭7-3)—the diminished fifth interval that defines a dominant-7th chord.

The trick is to keep the fifth and fourth strings stationary while you yank the third string up a half-step. This takes practice, but it's worth the effort. Some tips:

• Keep your fretting-hand thumb centered behind the neck, almost directly below the 2nd—the pulling—finger.

• Arch your 3rd and 1st fretting fingers so that the 5 and ♭7 sustain against the bend and release.

• Pluck the chord using pick, middle (*m*), and ring fingers (*a*). This hybrid grip lets you snap the *G* string for a Buchanan-approved tone.

In bar 1, we dig into *G7* as a three-note chord. The bends and releases nestle within a cool *C7* arpeggio in bar 2. Once you've nailed both approaches, take them up and down the fretboard. Notice the subtle differences in string tension and pulling-finger angle between low and high positions. Use a bright tone and a touch of reverb.

CLAMPING DOWN

A tritone is unique: It's the only interval that remains the same when you invert it. **Ex. 2** shows how Buchanan worked the tritone-sus4 bend with the ♭7 as the highest note. As before, the bend falls on the third string. This time, however, the stationary note is on the second string, which means you need to *push* the bend rather than pull it. Compare bar 1's *G7* and *C7* shifts to the previous example. In Ex. 1, the bends were the top voice, but now we're stretching the bottom voice. Cool, huh?

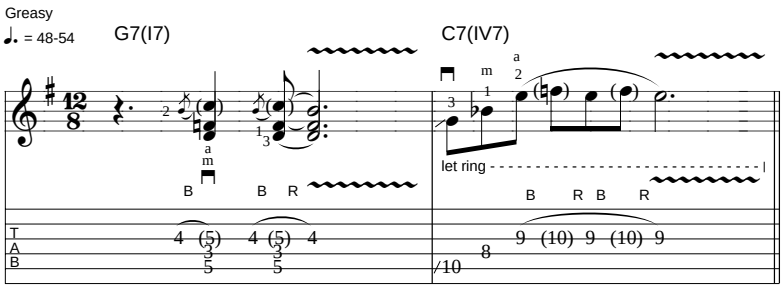
But that's not all: Heading into bar 2, we anticipate *G7* using one of Buchanan's favorite moves—a double-string bend and release. This one requires some finesse, because you're raising the second string a half-step while bending the third string a whole-step.

One way to make this non-parallel bend is to form a "clamp" consisting of the 4th finger on the second string and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd fingers on the third string. When you swivel this clamp toward you, the inherent strength difference between the puny 4th and burly "gang of three" work in your favor. With a smooth twist of your wrist, you're able to bend up to two different pitches. Try it.

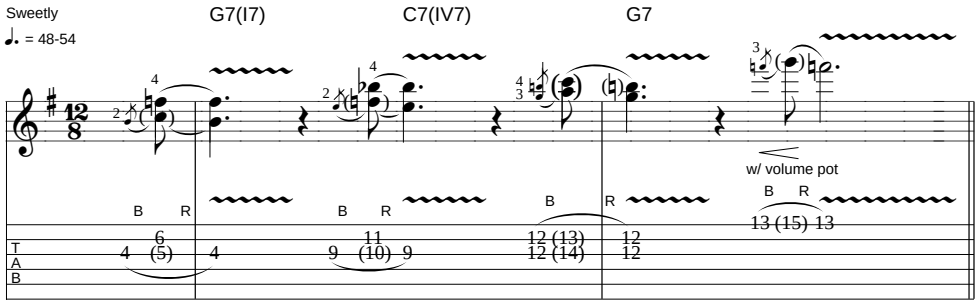
"It's all a matter of balance," Buchanan explained. "I use the muscles back in my forearm for the bend. My wrist acts as a pivot for leverage." A quarter-rest precedes each bend—use this time to set up your hand position. Once you figure out the right amount of torque, the notes practically play themselves. The goal is not to *think* about the pitches, but simply seize them. Wrap your thumb around the neck for extra support.

The last ♭7-1 bend features another trademark Buchananism—the volume-knob swell. Again, the quarter-rest gives you a moment to duck down the pot so you can then crank it open

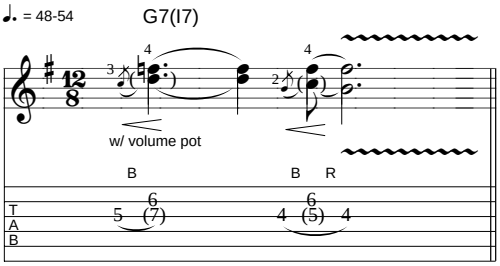
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



while bending into *G*. Go for a synchronized bend and swell.

TRAIN TIME

To pull off a manual volume swell, you need to have control of your picking-hand pinky. It will get a good workout in **Ex. 3**—another sweet Buchanan lick that features two different bends against the stationary ♭7 and a corresponding pair of volume swells.

Let's take a closer look. The first move *starts* from a fretted *G7sus4* and resolves upward to *G7* via a bend—the exact opposite of what we've explored so far. Wacky! Following this move is the now-familiar *G7sus4-G7* bend and release. Again, keep the bends and swells in sync. Done right, this move turns heads.

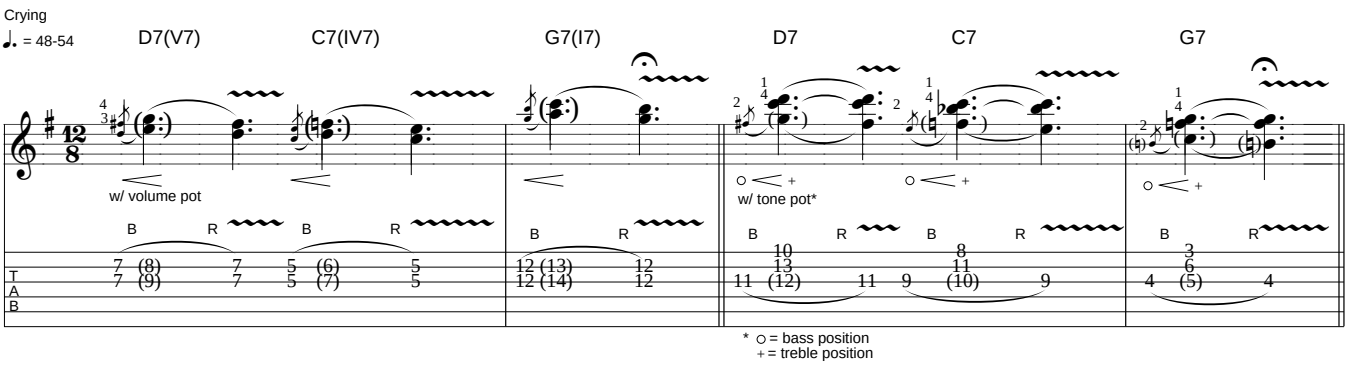
Is your *G* string getting hot? Fingertips a little tender? If not, wait until you try **Ex. 4a**, a V7-IV7-I7, *D7-C7-G7* cadence built from Buchanan's non-linear double-bends and volume-knob swells. Remember the clamp technique.

Ex. 4b, another V7-IV7-I7 cadence in *G*, features tone-pot swells and a new twist on the sus4-dom7 lick. Here, we hold two strings above the 4-to-3 bend and release. Check out the cool major second on top—*clang*. Buchanan used this when he wanted to punch through the din of the band. Treat your tone pot like a manual wah by starting the bend with the highs rolled off and opening up the treble as you raise the note's pitch. You have to be nimble for this one.

THE ART OF PRE-BENDING

Ex. 5 shows how Buchanan seamlessly blended blues with country. It opens with a pair of pedal-steel moves against *D9* and *C9*, and then resolves to *G7* with a nasty Freddie King lick. The steel

Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b

licks start life as sus2 chords that morph into major triads by way of a whole-step bend. When stretching the third string, back up your 2nd finger with your 1st for extra strength.

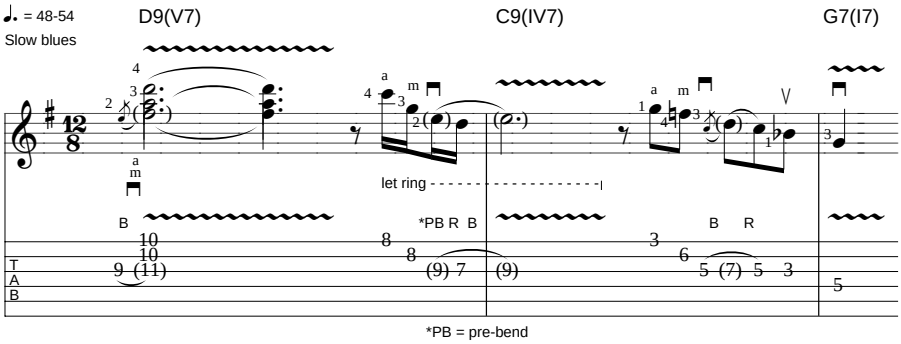
Notice the pre-bend heading into bar 2. The challenge is to silently stretch up a whole-step from *D* and have the *E* fully in tune when you pick it. Because you can't aurally monitor the note, you have to instinctively learn how far to push the string. It's a matter of muscle memory and practice.

You have a mere eighth-note rest in which to shift from the tenth to the eighth position *and* set up the pre-bend. Hey, no one said this was easy—we're talking Roy Buchanan here! Follow the picking-hand indications and snap those strings.

Pre-bends are fun—let's try another. **Ex. 6** opens with a twangy three-finger grip that Buchanan favored for blues. It's best to simultaneously fret *D*, *C*, and *G*, and quickly pre-bend *G* to *A before* picking a note. You've got a quarter-rest to set up your fretting fingers. When beat two rolls around, you'll be ready to pick. Heed the *let ring* marking—don't release your grip until the last note in bar 1.

Bar 2 has its special moves as well: First play the bend as a half-step, then push it up *another* half-step. Against the sustaining high *F*, this dual-stage stretch sounds sassy, then sweet. Add vibrato to the final bend.

Ex. 5



Copping Roy's Restless Tone

Buchanan was a very physical player with an insistent, in-your-face sound. You can hear him constantly working his strings and controls. Even his studio recordings sound live. To *fully* explore Buchanan's bold, immediate timbres and raucous vibe, you'll need a Tele equipped with a steel bridge and 3-way brass saddles, but you can use the following tips on any guitar.

• Your picking hand is your tone generator. Keep roving—shift your picking position between the neck and bridge for maximum timbral variation. A hybrid grip lets you combine flatpicking and plucking for even more tonal possibilities. "From playing steel," said Buchanan, "I learned to use a pick plus my middle and ring fingers. You're cheating yourself if you just flatpick."

• Don't overlook the sonic effects of pick angle; keep adjusting it to suit your phrasing. Picking a string dead flat creates a popping, snappy sound. Angling your pick smooths out the attack. Upstroking—especially with a roughened edge—yields a raw cry. For singing tone, Buchanan favored a light attack: "To get that steel sound," he said, "don't use a lot of hard picking, but an easy touch really close to the bridge with the volume way up."

• For a vocal sound, manipulate your tone and volume knobs with your middle finger or pinky while picking a line. "The volume is not always wide open on my guitar," revealed Buchanan. "Having reserve volume is necessary for some of my effects. I'll simultaneously strike the string, bend it, and roll the volume up with my right hand to get that crying sound. I'll think of a word like "help" and try to duplicate it."

• Treat your pickup selector as another tone control. Buchanan would switch pickups to accentuate different portions of a phrase.

• Find an amp setting that affords a range of clean and dirty sounds depending on how hard you pick, and where you set your guitar volume knob. Finding the magic spot takes patience. (Think of this as manual, continuous channel switching.) For maximum dynamics, reduce preamp gain. A key component of Buchanan's sound was speaker distortion, so find a small amp that you can push hard. Buchanan ran his volume and tone controls "full out," and barely cracked the reverb.

• Keep your plain strings spotlessly clean. You simply can't bend cruddy wire effectively—it literally hangs up on the frets. If a cotton dishtowel or diaper doesn't do the trick, wipe the strings down with a damp, soapy washcloth.

• Don't squeeze the strings any harder than necessary. Gripping with excessive tension puts the strings out of tune, strangles sustain, and can lead to muscle damage. The best players use a surprisingly light touch—even when tearing into a lick or pushing a three-fret bend. Lighten up and simply skate across the fret crowns.

• Single-coil pickups offer clarity and definition that favor multi-string bends and close-interval licks. However, if adjusted too close to the strings, a single-coil's rod magnets will rob sustain and create false overtones. Lower your pickups a quarter-turn. Do your strings ring more and sound sweeter? If so, make up the volume loss at your amp.

• Try seasoning your lines with pinched overtones—a Buchanan sonic signature. Here's how he explained his technique: "You need a lot of treble. As you pick the string, let a little bit of skin from your thumb touch the string along with the pick. You've got to attack with pressure—you can't do it easy. It works best on the thinner strings. After you get the high overtone , you can drop down from a bend into a straight note by just hammering without picking the string." —AE

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GAPPED-STRING ♭5 BENDING

Gapped-string licks—like the one at the end of Ex. 6—sound compelling because of their inherent wide intervals. **Ex. 7** illustrates how Buchanan worked these fifths and sixths into a minor blues context. All the action in beats one, two, and three occurs beneath the droning high *D*. The ♭5 in beat one evokes the late-night jazz of early Grant Green and Kenny Burrell. The difference is they would typically hammer or slide into the ♭5, while Buchanan bent into it. Try both methods.

HIGH AND CRYIN'

Ex. 8, another minor-blues Buchanan lick, couples gapped-string musings with the bend we first encountered in Ex. 3. This time, however, we're bending the sus4 into an implied *Gm7*. Hold the bent third string while you play the second string.

Shove this move up an octave and refinger it on the second and first strings and you have **Ex. 9a**. Here, you hold the bent second string against the first. For maximum wail, keep the top note sustaining across beat two's smooth release. It's hard to overstate the importance of this oblique bend—it's an essential blues-rock maneuver.

One more thing: In the previous example, we played this bend against *Gm7* (*G*, *B♭*, *D*, *F*). Now, we're draping over *G7* (*G*, *B*, *D*, *F*). The only difference is the *B♭* and *B♮*. Because blues balances on a major/minor axis, you can get away with playing the ♭3 (beat two's *B♭*) against chords containing a ♮3. In fact, without this tangy tension, music doesn't sound "bluesy."

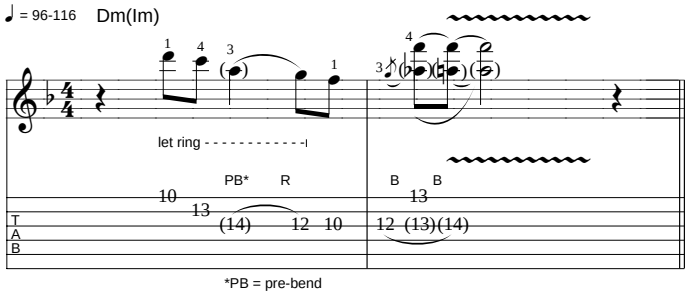
Ex. 9b is a cool Buchanan variation on the previous *G7* bend. In beat two, notice how he arpeggiates an *Edim7* chord. This phrase sounds good over either *G7*, the I7, or as a ramp into *C7*, the IV7.

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

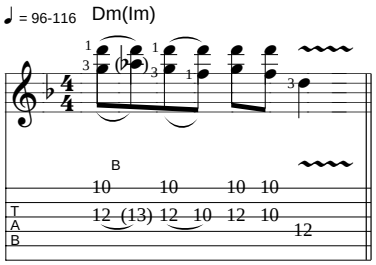
Featuring double-stops and triplets, **Examples 10a**, **10b**, and **10c** are three related *C7* licks. Pull-offs drive 10a, 10b uses the bending clamp we discussed in Ex. 2, and 10c concludes with a sneaky double-stop quarter-bend. This move takes practice. Fret the double-stop with your 1st finger and gently pull the third string toward your feet while keeping the second string stationary. Initially that may seem impossible, but keep at it. Eventually you should be able to pull the bottom note up a half-step while holding the top note still. It's a neat one-finger lick.

The same double-stop quarter-bend plays a key role in **Ex. 11**. But the coolest part of this Buchanan lick is the transition into *C7* from *G7*. The chromatic walk-up is all

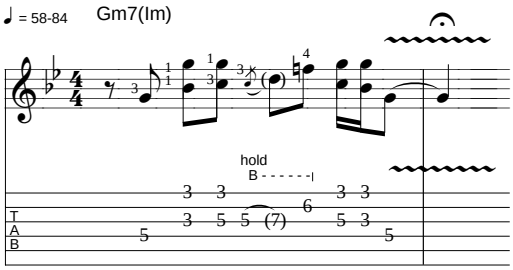
Ex. 6



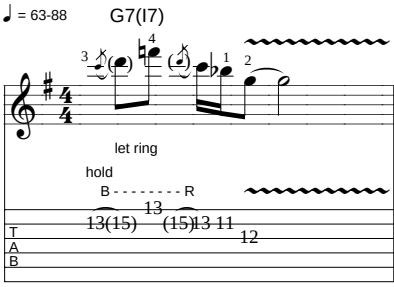
Ex. 7



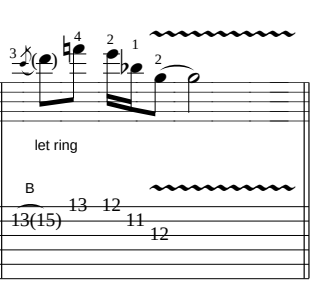
Ex. 8



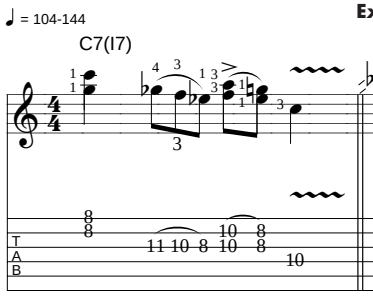
Ex. 9a



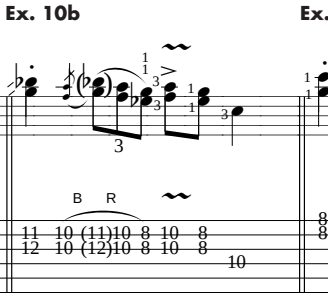
Ex. 9b



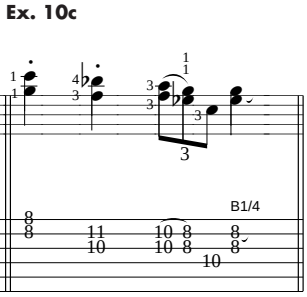
Ex. 10a



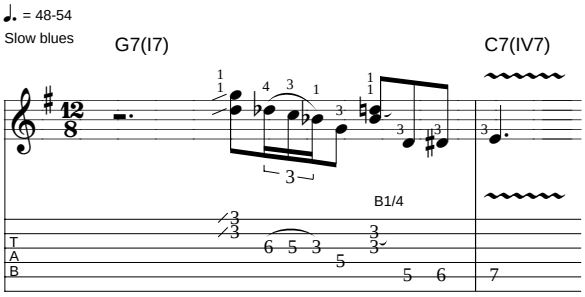
Ex. 10b



Ex. 10c



Ex. 11



3rd finger, and the resulting position shift draws you out of the blues-box ghetto into potentially jazzier turf. (Hint: Try nosing around a root-position *B♭maj7* on strings 4, 3, 2, and 1. It's practically under your fingertips and offers upper extensions of *C7*.)

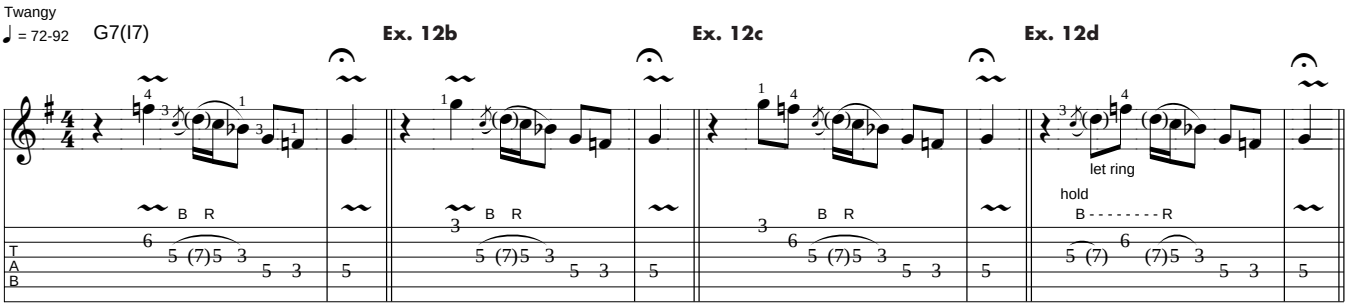
VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Buchanan had the knack of giving licks a new spin each time he played them, as evidenced by the four phrases in **Ex. 12**, culled from his blues tunes. Each lick nails *G7* and includes a bend and release, as well as a pull-off into the ♭3. The differences occur at the front: **12a** starts with the ♭7, **12b** with the root; **12c** combines both, and **12d** features Buchanan's characteristic bend-and-hold-one-note-against-another move. These licks are fun and funky, but most important, they show how a small variation yields a new line.

Sometimes the best way to expand your vocabulary is to deconstruct what you already know, so once you learn Ex. 12's phrases, visit four of your favorites and figure out three new ways to play each one. You can change the rhythm, change the note order, or add chromatic passing tones. Try displacing the line by, say, an eighth-note, or transpose it up or down an octave. Map the identical figure onto a different string set and see if the resulting fingering changes suggest new possibilities. And always look for ways to bend into a note you might normally fret. "I'll often bend up or drop down to a note rather than fret it," said Buchanan. "Then I can get all those little notes in between."

Finally, here's the biggest lesson we can learn from Buchanan: Your guitar is your voice. Absorb these bends and moves not to mimic *his* sound, but to give expression to your own. Even for such gifted players as Buchanan, this can be a struggle. As he told *GP*, "Homer Haynes of Homer and Jethro told me something once when we were doing a show in Las Vegas. I said, 'I don't feel I can learn anymore. I'm not capable. I'm as good as I'll ever be.' Homer replied, 'Remember one thing: The way you feel now means you're ready to really *start* to learn.' I've never forgotten that."

Ex. 12a



Ex. 12b

Ex. 12c

Ex. 12d